Title: History Meets Fiction: A Study of Select Contemporary Indian English Novels

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Registration no. VB-1730 of 2013 -14

Date of Registration : 14.05.2013/14.05.2018

Keywords: Historical novel, Historiographic metafiction, Postmodernism, Non-linear narrative, Oral tradition

Synopsis

This thesis proposes to examine the treatment of history in Indian English fiction with special reference to the works of Shashi Tharoor, I. Allan Sealy, Mukul Kesavan and Vikram Chandra. It seeks to provide a detailed analysis of the mutual relationship between history and fiction as it evolved through a long and continuous process and how the chosen novelists have used and incorporated history into their novels.

Novel, the most dominant literary genre, has been engaged in an intimate relationship with history. Although examples of historical fiction can be found before the Romantic period, most literary historians credit Walter Scott with the establishment of a genre(historical fiction) that has distinct thematic and formal characteristics.By the 20th century both this thematic approach to history and the narrative formula used to express it had largely lost their appeal for writers. It is only after the second World war and the rise of postmodernism that the historical novel attracts the attention of major writers.Thematically the difference between these novels and the earlier ones lies in what Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*(1979) has called the rejection of grand narratives. Also the inclusion of history in these novels has been reshaped by the postmodern notion of history.Postmodernists view history as a form of narrative discourse and challenge the idea that historical events can be presented truthfully and objectively. Therefore postmodernist historical novels attempt to insert history into novels to subvert historical facts and rewrite them from a perspective different from the accepted interpretation. Stylistically postmodern historical novels employ a number of devices like self –reflexivity, non-linear narrative, parody and pastiche, ironic use of intertextuality to express their notion of history.

Now we must examine the above literary phenomenon in the Indian context. Almost all literatures in major Indian languages have a long tradition of using history as source material. In the nineteenth century the rising interest in Indian past/s, stimulated by the British presence in the subcontinent and the example of the English tradition of historical fiction, generated "a steady increase in the conscious use of history"(Dhar 74)in Indian literatures, especially novels. Indian twentieth-century history – with its twists and turns, triumphs and tragedies – offers a lot to draw upon for novelists with interest in Indian history. In this regard the fiction of the 1980s is especially interesting as it witnessed the second coming of the Indian English Novel with the

appearance of *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie. Its influence on the subsequent novelists has been apparent in a number of ways: the appearance of a certain postmodern playfulness, the turn to history, use of new experimental strategies in narration, use of fantasy and a new exuberance of language, all seem to owe something to Rushdie's novel. *Midnight's Children* is a perfect example of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction", that is "novels that are intensely self-reflexive but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge"(*Pastime* 285-86). Hutcheon explains that historiographic metafiction-"refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction.It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim,both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses,human constructs,signifying systems,and both derive their claim to truth from that identity"(*Poetics* 93). Historiographic metafiction thus makes conscious efforts to foreground and even problematize the process of recording history.

If we take a look at the Indian English novel from the beginning of the 1980s till approximately mid-1990s, from Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) to Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* (1995),we can find out that many Indian English novels of the "post-Rushdie" period are concerned with national politics and history,with which the protagonists' individual lives are intertwined. These writers followed Rushdie's footsteps with the use of magic realism, mythopoeia and fantasy, fragmentary mode of story-telling in their works to generate multiple conceptions of India and Indianness. These writers are keen not only to experiment with the form of the novel and destabilize the features that were considered as essential in conventional novel writing but also seek a rewriting of certain events in Indian history.

Using the theoretical perspective of postmodernism and the concept of 'historiographic metafiction', an attempt will be made to analyze the novels *The Trotter-Nama* (1988),*The Great Indian Novel*(1989)and*Riot:A Love Story*, *Looking Through Glass*(1995) and *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*(1995) written respectively by I.Allan Sealy, Shashi Tharoor, Mukul Kesavan and Vikram Chandra. These novels which all deal with Indian history challenge and question some of the established conventions of traditional history writing by using ancient Indian myths, oral tradition, digressive narrative techniques and such literary means as satire, magic realism and/or metafictional devices. These experiments and innovations in technique reflect the1980s'flirtation with postmodernism which, according to Robert Young, "could be said to mark not just the cultural effects of a new stage of 'late' capitalism, but the sense of loss of European history and culture as History and Culture, the loss of their unquestioned place at the centre of the world"(*Mythologies* 20). Apart from challenging the western idea of historiography these novels "also foreground, in their different ways, the act of narration"(Mehrotra 329).The above – mentioned novelists revive and intelligently rework the countless traditional Indian forms for their purposes of historical narration and their distinct narratological modes show interesting points of intersection with postmodern narrative technique.

The introductory chapter will look at the relation between history and literature or historiography and works of fiction. The emergence and growth of historical novel will be traced and an analysis will also be made of the term 'historical novel' as a critical category to explain and evaluate history-fiction connection in specific terms. The second chapter will deal with the

development of the Indian English Novel. It can be said that the novel in India came into its own under the impact of the novel in the West and the novel's engagement with history was at the very root of its development. The historical novel had a major influence on the novelists in India first on the ones who wrote in regional languages and later on the novelists who wrote in English. In this regard analysis will be made of the novels of earlier Indian English writers upto Salman Rushdie and their use of history. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* heralded the new era in the history of Indian English Fiction. Through a self-conscious intermingling of history and fiction Rushdie developed a complex form of Indian fictional writing combining Indian oral narrative tradition and postmodernist techniques. Following Rushdie many contemporary writers offer fresh perspectives of the past through their distinct narratological modes.

The following chapter will be devoted to Shashi Tharoor and his two novels- *The Great Indian Novel* and *Riot: A Love Story*. *The Great Indian Novel* is a satirical narrativisation of the 20th century Indian history in a mythological format borrowed from the *Mahabharata*. Tharoor's novel, with its metafictional devices, oral narrative techniques and basic structure of myth, offers a powerful counter history of India. It challenges the official and imperialist version of history and attempts to foreground alternative indigenous historical version of reality in a fictional mode. On the other hand *Riot: A Love Story* is concerned with history as it is lived in a particular space and time. Unlike *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor here chooses to work on a small canvas, a small, dusty town called Zalilgarh. The novel is presented in the manner of acollage. It presents a dozen versions of a given situation, none being privileged over the other. Tharoor here seems to suggest the plural aspect of history where each version has its own validity, its own truth, and its own beauty.

The next chapter looks at Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* which is a remarkable piece of historiographic metafiction that imaginatively reconstructs the final years of Indian National movement. The following chapter will concentrate onI.Allan Sealy's *The Trotter- Nama.* The novel, dedicated to the "other Anglo-Indians", is an example of imaginative and historically committed writing. It tries to recuperate the history of the Anglo-Indian community disowned by its own progenitors- the Europeans as well as Indians. The next chapter will deal with Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, a wide-ranging epic novel that incorporates diverse narratives into a single, flexible frame. In it fiction intermingles with both history and myth, embracing diverse interpretations of the past history of India. The concluding chapter summarizes the argument and makes a list of findings deduced from the discussion on the chosen novelists.

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